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OPERATIONS OF THE 101st AIRBORNE DIVISION
IN THE AIRBORNE INVASION OF THE NETHERLANDS
17 SEPTEMBER - 27 SEPTEMBER 1944
(RHINELAND CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Participation - Battalion Executive
of an Airborne AA/AT Battalion

Type of operation described: AIRBORNE DIVISION
SECURING AXIS OF ADVANCE FOR ATTACKING
ARMOR AND INFANTRY UNITS.

Major Robert R. Kemm, Infantry
ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS NO. I

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INTRODUCTION

In September 1944 the Allied Armies which had been making such rapid progress after the breakout at St. Lo, were slowly grinding to a halt along the whole front facing East against Germany. Our war machine was bogging down, becoming partially immobilized. The capabilities for mounting large scale assaults were becoming more remote as the Armies stretched their supply lines to the breaking point and enemy resistance stiffened. (1)

Stabilization of our lines was taking place generally, from the 1st Army's sector in the Aachen area south along the German border to Metz, Nancy and Epinal, and when the Belfort pocket was reduced, south from Epinal to the Swiss frontier. (See Map A) Fighting along this line was characterized by stubborn resistance and limited advances. (2)

On the northern flank of our position, the British 2nd Army and Canadian 1st Army, after having cleared the coastal areas of France and Belgium and invested the ports of Boulogne, Calais and Dunkirk, had established a firm bridgehead over the Escaut Canal at De Groot Bridge on the road to Eindhoven. (3)

Thus, while our troops had been eminently successful in their operation up to date, and had accomplished the liberation of France and Belgium, the use of badly needed ports was denied them. Calais, Boulogne and Dunkirk were still in enemy hands. Antwerp, which had fallen to the British XXX Corps on the 4th of September, was useless as a port while the enemy still occupied the Scheldt estuary. (4)

(1) A-3, p.65; (2) A-3, p.66; (3) A-4, p.217; (4) A-5, p.69.

The plan of action evolved at this time was to attack to the northeast. Reasons for choosing this direction were many. It was the location of the great bulk of the German Army. The flying bomb area which was located here could be overrun, ending the menace to England and preventing the enemy from obtaining propaganda value from talk of "new weapons" which might play a decisive role in the outcome of the war. Another factor in favor of the northeastward attack was the probable effect it would have in opening the port of Antwerp, which was so badly needed if the Allied advance into Germany was to resume its momentum. The airfields of Belgium and Holland were also an attractive prize to be sought. But the most important consideration given to an attack in this direction was that the lower Rhine was most favorable as an avenue of advance into the heart of Germany, especially during the late summer and early autumn months. The gamble centered around the enemy's ability to recover from the rapid exploitation which was intended in this attack. It was expected that both the Siegfried Line and the Rhine River would be crossed, and that strong bridgeheads would be established before the enemy would be able to counter our thrust with a strong stand at Arnhem. It was at this time that Field Marshal Montgomery was afforded the use of the entire Airborne force. (5)

It was optimistically hoped that the success of this operation would prevent the West Wall from playing its role - that it might become another fixed position with its guns pointed in the wrong direction. The whole complexion of the war in the West might change, as a result. Although the German frontier and Siegfried defenses had been pierced at a number of

points, the strongest Nazi positions had yet to be reached and reduced. Rugged mountains, impenetrable forests and the River Rhine would tend to slow up the Allied advance and take us into a winter campaign. In the North, however, if the Rhine could be crossed, a more favorable type of battleground would be made available, in which the Allies' superiority in armor could be employed most advantageously. The open, rolling country of northern Germany was most inviting!

Out of this situation and these decisions came the plan known as Operation Market-Garden; a two part plan combining an Airborne operation (Market) which would supplement and assist the Ground effort (Garden).

With the exception of the British 2nd Army, all armies on the western front were to stop their further advance while supplies were diverted to the British 2nd Army and concentrated for an extreme effort. (6)

Operation Market, the Airborne operation, was designed to assist the ground effort by the seizure of the bridges over the Maas, Waal and the lower Rhine at Grave, Nijmegen and Arnhem. The units involved in this operation were the 82nd Airborne Division, the 101st Airborne Division, the British 1st Airborne Division and the Polish 1st Parachute Brigade. The capture of these bridges would enable the armor and infantry of the British 2nd Army to advance rapidly northward from the general line of the Albert and Escaut Canals, on a front as narrow as possible. The armor was to cut off retreat of enemy troops in western Holland, by continuing the advance to the Zuider Zee.

Operation Garden had as its axis of advance, the road

which ran through Eindhoven, St. Oedenrode, Veghel, Uden, Grave, Nijmegen, Arnhem and Appeldorn. The British XXX Corps was to spearhead the advance with the VIII and XII Corps advancing more slowly on the flanks.

The following disposition of the Airborne units was to be made: The British 1st Airborne Division was to be dropped farthest north in the Arnhem area, the U.S. 82nd Airborne Division in the Nijmegen area and the U.S. 101st Airborne Division in the St. Oedenrode area north of Eindhoven. The 1st Polish Parachute Brigade was to reinforce the efforts of the 1st British Airborne Division on D+2. (7)

Supplies, ammunition and transport for the job were estimated to be adequate if all went well and stubborn opposition were not encountered. The destruction of the German armies might very well result from the execution of this bold and daring plan.

Enemy forces in Holland at this time were reported to be withdrawing across the Scheldt estuary; but continued to hold both banks. They were also reported to be bringing troops around north of the Escaut Canal to positions in the line further east. They were also maintaining their positions in the Dutch ports, with the aim of hampering Allied supply efforts if and when the Allied offensive liberated Holland. These forces were supposed to be badly depleted, having suffered severe casualties in the Normandy pocket and in the retreat across the Seine. It was generally the opinion that the troops in the line of advance of the 2nd British Army would present no serious threat to that advance. (8)

(7) A-3, p.67; (8) A-13, p.1

DIVISION PLAN

Previous to this operation, the 101st Airborne Division had been alerted for no less than three Airborne operations, all of which had been cancelled when ground forces reached the objective before the Airborne operation could take place.

This, however, was the real thing, and by 11 September, plans were sufficiently advanced to get a more general idea of the part the 101st was to play in this operation. On the 15th September the elements of the Division which were to land by parachute and glider were sealed in their marshalling areas, where on the 16th of September they were briefed and issued ammunition, rations, maps and orders. All were ready for take-off at daylight on the 17th. (9)

As its mission, the 101st had the task of securing the four highway and railway bridges over the Aa River and the Willem Vaart Canal at Veghel, seize the highway bridge over the Dommel River at St. Oedenrode and the bridge over the Wilhelmina Canal at Zon. In addition to this, it had the task of seizing Eindhoven and the bridge in that city. These objectives were spread over a road distance of 15 miles. (10) (See Map B)

Original plans called for the 101st to drop its units in seven drop zones near the bridges and other objectives involved. However, the Division Commander, Major General Maxwell D. Taylor, was doubtful concerning the effectiveness of the Division if it were to drop in such a dispersed condition, and after a protest to General Browning, the British Commander of the Airborne forces, secured approval for the Division to drop in three concentrated areas which were to be used as airheads from which

(9) Personal Knowledge; (10) Personal Knowledge.

the objectives in question could be seized. Eindhoven, moreover, became a secondary objective in the time schedule. (11)

It was decided to employ one parachute regiment in the Veghel mission, with the remainder of the Division to land on the D. Z. between St. Oedenrode and Zon. From this airhead, operations could be conducted to the north of St. Oedenrode and also south to Zon and Eindhoven. The D+1 glider echelon and resupply flights were to use this airhead also. L.Z.-W was its designation on the operation maps. (12) (See Map B)

TERRAIN

Some word concerning the terrain on which the 101st would operate, is in order at this point. In all of the area, only the sand dunes of the Wybosch - Erde area could be said to rise above the surrounding terrain. Large meadows and small cultivated plots, both lined with rows of poplars, dominated the area. Small patches of woods dotted the landscape. The only forest which could be classified as such, extended north of the Wilhelmina Canal, between Zon and Best. Many drainage ditches in addition to the rivers and canals, crisscrossed the area. The canals offered the greatest obstacles to movement, being about 60 feet wide and ~~plenty~~ deep enough to drown in. None of the rivers in the area were more than 25 feet across. Tanks would be road-bound, because they could cross the canals only at the bridges. When they did operate off the roads, they were limited by additional water barriers and marshy ground. The road itself was quite adequate for military needs, being constructed of asphalt and brick. As related in the Division History, "There was nothing wrong with the road. It was the fight to keep it as a corridor that made the men call it 'Hell's High-

(11) A-6, p.264; (12) Personal Knowledge.

way'". (See Map B)

REGIMENTAL MISSIONS

In accord, then, with General Taylor's desire for a highly concentrated drop, both the 502nd and 506th Parachute Regiments were dropped in the area northwest of Zon on Drop Zones B and C respectively. This same area was also to be used for glider landings. The 501st Parachute Regiment made a separate drop in the Veghel area.

The 506th was to seize the bridge over the Wilhelmina Canal at Zon; from there it was to move on to the south, to take Eindhoven and its highway bridge over the Dommel River.

Guarding the L. Z. fell to the lot of the 502nd. It was also to capture the bridge at St. Oedenrode and be prepared to assume the defense of Zon, supporting the 506th in its southern move to Eindhoven. Another of its tasks was to use a company to seize the road and railroad bridges at Best, which flanked the zone of responsibility.

The 501st, from its separate D. Z.s to the north, was to capture the highway and railway bridges at Veghel which crossed the Zuid Willems Vaart Canal and the Aa River. (13)

OPERATIONS OF THE DIVISION (See Map C)

The softening up process took place on the night of 16-17 September, when the R. A. F. Bomber Command dropped 890 tons of bombs in the Operation Market area, and on the morning of the 17th, when the Eindhoven Airfield received a stunning blow by six B-17s. (14)

Departing from bases in England on Sunday, the 17th of September, 424 C-47 transport planes bearing the parachute echelon of the Division, flew the southern route over Belgium so

(13) A-2, p.2; (14) A-13, p.2.

that the minimum amount of time would be spent over enemy-held territory.

Accompanied by Air Force fighters which flew the escort and umbrella cover over the drop zones, while others performed anti-flak patrol missions, the air armada arrived at its destination without serious interference until five minutes from the D. Z. when light flak harassed it. However, all the planes held their formation and the final run was made. Between 1300 and 1330 hours, 6,769 men of the Division landed on Dutch soil.

(15)

The 501st Parachute Infantry, with two platoons of the 326th Airborne Engineer Battalion attached, utilized two drop zones in its attack on Veghel. The regiment, less the 1st Battalion, from its drop zone 'A', advanced on the town from the west. Meeting light opposition, it had no difficulty in accomplishing its mission. So routine was its action, that by 1500 hours, it had succeeded in capturing the four vital bridges in and around Veghel. The 1st Battalion, however, which had planned to drop just north of the rail bridge over the Canal, thereby enabling it to seize the two canal bridges, actually dropped on D. Z. 'A-1', about three miles northwest of that location on the other side of the river. Moreover, this battalion met with scattered enemy resistance as it moved southeast toward the town, and it was not until 1700 hours that it reached Veghel. The enemy had offered no organized defense of the town, so that by dark the regiment had set up its defensive positions and was prepared to hold it against any counterattack. None of the bridges involved had received any damage, and in addition, the engineers started a second road

bridge across the Willems Vaart Canal, to provide two-way traffic should it become necessary. (16)

The 502nd Parachute Infantry made its drop on D. Z.-B. Enemy opposition was non-existent, and by 1500 hours, all its battalions had completed their assembly and were ready to proceed on their missions. The 1st Battalion, in moving north to St. Oedenrode, encountered determined enemy resistance which pinned it down temporarily. This was eventually overcome and the 1st Battalion moved into town, taking its objective, the bridge over the Dommel River, intact. A perimeter defense was established, and the reactions of the enemy were awaited.

The 3rd Battalion dispatched 'H' Company to secure the highway bridge at Best. Originally, the Division Commander had decided that a platoon would be sufficient to perform this mission. However, the Regimental Commander increased this to a company, at the request of the 3rd Battalion Commander. As it turned out, a task force of four battalions with attached tanks was necessary to accomplish this task, after three days of hard fighting. This, incidentally, was a supplementary function which was not included in the mission of the Division! In fact, when the Division Commander had discussed it with General Dempsey, the latter had evinced no interest at all in the town of Best, since the bridges concerned were not in the route of XXX Corps. Realizing the value of these bridges as an alternate route, in the event that the main road was interdicted, General Taylor believed that they were worth the effort. (17)

The remainder of the 502nd Parachute Regiment went into Division reserve near the town of Zon, where the Division com-

mand post was located. The rest of the 3rd Battalion was dispatched to Best at about 1800 hours, with orders to secure the bridge the next morning, when reports from 'H' Company indicated that their position was untenable.

Drop Zone 'C' was assigned to the 506th Parachute Infantry which landed in compact groups. Assembly was expedited by the excellence of the landing, and by the fact that enemy resistance was most indifferent. Thus the third parachute unit of the Division had also achieved the element of surprise in landing in hostile territory.

The 1st Battalion had the mission of moving directly from the drop zone to seize the main bridge over the Wilhelmina Canal at Zon. Two other smaller bridges over the Canal were also to be taken if at all possible. In accordance with plans, as soon as the men appeared at the assembly point, they were grouped in units of 15 or 20 and moved out quickly to the south, under the direction of an officer. No time was to be lost in accomplishing the mission assigned to the 506th. When the Zon bridge had been secured, the other elements of the regiment were to pass through, moving south on Eindhoven.

South of Eindhoven, the British XXX Corps was to strike out of its bridgehead at the moment the 506th "Hit the Silk". The 506th would have the door to Eindhoven open for the Guards' armor to pass through on its way north.

The 2nd Battalion, after normal reorganization, started down the road toward Zon, followed by Regimental Headquarters Company and the 3rd Battalion. Zon was approached by the 2nd Battalion without resistance of any consequence. On reaching the outskirts, however, fire from two German 88 mm guns was brought to bear on the leading elements. A rapid maneuver on

the part of the lead company outflanked the gun positions and they were rapidly knocked out, allowing the 2nd Battalion to advance without too much delay.

The 1st Battalion, too, had encountered resistance from 88 mm guns as it approached the Canal; but finally overwhelmed them and continued its advance. When it was about 150 yards from its objective, the bridge blew up with a deafening roar. Several men jumped into the Canal and swam across, while others found rowboats. These small groups silenced the small arms fire which had been harassing the 2nd Battalion from positions in houses across the Canal. The 506th had the Canal crossing; but it had no bridge for the British armor to cross on. By the use of expedients, the regiment made the crossing, and by midnight of the 17th, was in position south of the Canal, holding a bridgehead about 2000 yards deep. The advancing British were advised of the situation at Zon, and were requested to include bridging equipment in the leading elements of their spearhead.

Obviously, the plan of taking Eindhoven by 2000 hours on the 17th, would have to be readjusted. A night attack was considered; but rejected because of the risk involved. It seemed to the Regimental Commander, Col. Robert F. Sink, on the night of the 17th, that the blown bridge at Zon might seriously affect the outcome of the complete operation. (18)

But the British had run into exceedingly heavy opposition south of Eindhoven, and had advanced only half way to that city when a halt for the night was called. Eindhoven, moreover, was a secondary objective, and its taking could wait until the next day.

(18) Personal Knowledge

At the end of the day the Division could count its job as having been well done. All its D-Day objectives along the road had been secured. While the blown bridge at Zon was annoying and had delayed the capture of Eindhoven, the overall picture was favorable, and Operation Garden was not jeopardized. True, the 502nd was having difficulties at Best; but that did not affect the main effort. The axis of advance of XXX Corps was in the hands of the Division. (19)

On the 18th of September, conditions in the Division area were quite routine except for the fighting at Best and south of Zon. The 501st and the 502nd continued in defense of their respective towns and repulsed several light attacks; but it was evident that no strenuous attempt was being made on the part of the enemy, to recapture Veghel and St. Oedenrode.

While the fighting at Best was severe and did require a larger force than was originally considered necessary, its effect on the overall plan of the Division was not considered decisive. Therefore, we shall not consider it in this monograph; but shall concern ourselves with the main effort of the Division, namely, to seize and hold within its area of responsibility, the axis of advance for the British XXX Corps. Other diversionary actions of the Division will likewise be slighted in our attempt to concentrate on the more decisive actions.

The 506th Parachute Infantry continued its advance on Eindhoven as soon as it was light enough to see. The 3rd Battalion, which was the leading element in the advance, eventually was forced to halt about one mile north of the city, by determined enemy resistance which was concentrated around 88 mm guns and mortars. A wide envelopment to the east of the city was started

by the 2nd Battalion which in turn detailed a company to knock out the resistance which was holding up the 3rd Battalion, as the flanking move was initiated. This company was successful in destroying the 88s which had prevented the advance of the 3rd Battalion. Meanwhile, the rest of the flanking force continued into town. By 1300 hours, enemy resistance was eliminated as the two columns joined in the town. Cleaning up as it moved, the 506th then made contact with the main British forces south of the city, at 1900 hours. When night fell, the regiment had the entire city in its control, and strongly defended the bridge which was the main objective. (20)

The entire road had been opened within the Division sector, and now the tanks were ready to roll. Bridging equipment brought forward by the British was put into place at Zon, and on the morning of the 19th, thirty-six hours behind schedule, the Guards Armored Division thundered across the bridge and moved on its way to Nijmegen and Arnhem. The Division was now confronted with the problem of keeping the corridor open.

The Division had been functioning up to this time without artillery support and with very meager transportation facilities. This was now remedied, somewhat, by the arrival of partial glider lifts on the 18th and 19th of September, which brought in the 327th Glider Infantry, two Field Artillery Battalions and an Anti-tank Battalion with 6 pounder guns. The service units of the Division and vehicles of the parachute regiments also arrived. Due, however, to fog and adverse weather conditions, many of the gliders which took off from England failed to make the L. Z.. The AT Battalion, for example, could account for only 47 gliders out of the 81 which had taken

(20) A-6, p.306.

off. Ten of its twenty-four AT guns were missing, as well as seventeen of its thirty-nine quarter-ton trucks. All of the other units to arrive during this period were likewise affected.

(21)

After a decisive victory at Best, things were relatively quiet in the Division area. On the 20th of September, the 501st was still in possession of Veghel, the 502nd had closed into the St. Oedenrode area completely, leaving the 327th to take care of Zon and the immediate vicinity, while the 506th stood guard over Eindhoven.

A tank - infantry attack on the bridge at Zon was attempted by the enemy, and intermittent fighting took place in this area most of the day.

The 1st Battalion of the 506th assisted elements of the 327th Infantry in repelling an attack by the 107th Panzer Brigade, early in the morning of the 20th. This battalion had moved north from Eindhoven during the night. The 2nd Battalion of the 506th attacked the enemy rear, riding tanks of the 15/19 Hussars, and effectively broke up his attack, causing him to withdraw. At 1200 hours on the 21st, contact with the enemy force was lost. The Bailey Bridge at Zon remained intact, and the advance of the British forces was not impeded. No further attempts were made to sever the axis of advance at this point.

(22)

Since it would be excellent strategy on the part of the German forces to attempt to cut the road near the base of the corridor, so that the British and Americans at the north end could be dealt with more leisurely, the Division was prepared for such attacks in its area. But since the stretch of road

(21) Personal Knowledge; (22) Personal Knowledge.

it was responsible for, extended over at least 16 miles, it was obviously impossible to guard the road adequately at all points. (23)

On the 22nd of September, the Division rushed the 506th Infantry to the town of Uden which had been left unguarded. Information from the Dutch Underground indicated that a German attack would probably take place in this area.

The 501st still occupied Veghel, the 502nd was in control of the St. Oedenrode area and the 327th was still in the Zon L. Z. area.

At about 1000 hours, the advance detachment of the 506th passed through the town of Veghel, riding trucks of every description. This element of the regiment consisted of the Regimental Executive Officer, Lt. Col. Charles Chase, Regimental Headquarters Company and a platoon from the 2nd Battalion. Soon after it passed, a determined effort by the enemy from the southeast, cut the road just north of Veghel, leaving this detachment isolated in the town of Uden. (24)

The German units identified in this fighting were the 107th Panzer and the 280th Assault Gun Brigades, organized into a combat team. It had been part of the 107th Panzer Brigade which had made the unsuccessful attack on the Zon bridge. Evidently the enemy had moved from the Zon area to the town of Erp, where it had reorganized for this attack. It was estimated that three battalions of SS troops, supported by thirty to forty tanks and artillery, were also in this attack. It was obvious that this was to be a concentrated effort to cut the all important supply line to the north. (25)

At this time General McAuliffe was placed in command of

(23) A-6, p.352; (24) A-2, p.3; (25) A-2, p.4.

all troops in the area, in order to organize them for the defense of the town and its four bridges.

The 2nd Battalion of the 501st was taking the brunt of the attack on the Veghel - Erp road, when the 2nd Battalion of the 506th arrived in Veghel on its way to Uden. It was immediately rushed out the Uden road, to meet the attack which was trying to bypass the resistance offered by the 501st on the Erp road. However, the attack kept sliding around to the left flank of the 506th Battalion, and it rapidly became evident that additional troops would be needed. These were obtained from the 327th Infantry which was enroute to Veghel, having been ordered to proceed to that town the night before, in anticipation of just such an event. The 3rd Battalion of the 327th rapidly proceeded northward and went into position to the left of the 506th Battalion. With the aid of B Battery from the Anti-Tank Battalion, which knocked out the lead MK V tank of the attacking forces, the attack was eventually contained and finally repulsed by dark. The enemy forces were still across the road; but the attack on Veghel from the north and south had been driven off. (26)

A coordinated attack from the west also threatened Veghel and its bridges at about 1400 hours on the same day. West of the road there were many groups of Germans attempting to reach the homeland either by crossing directly to the east, or moving north of Arnhem. Some of these had organized into a semblance of a fighting outfit and were now moving against Veghel astride the Willems Vaart Canal, attempting to seize the highway bridge southwest of town. This attack was beaten off, after having progressed to within 500 yards of the bridge, by employ-

ing all available units which could be spared from the fighting north and east of town.

Another attack from the north, pointed at the railroad bridge over the River Aa, was likewise halted short of its objective.

The fighting during the day had been exceedingly confused. Units had been committed to action piecemeal, as they were available and as the need required. It was an improvised defense; but it succeeded even though the enemy artillery had severely punished the town and its environs. Continuous probing of the perimeter had taken place; but as resistance increased in all sectors where the Germans attempted penetrations, their assaults diminished and finally ceased altogether by dark.

The task of the Division was cut out for it on the morning of the 23rd: - the road to the north had to be opened. It was clogged, south of Veghel, with vehicles that had no place to go. This became the task of the 2nd and 3rd Battalions of the 506th Infantry. These two battalions set out astride the road at 1500 hours, after a day of attack and counterattack around the town.

The plan called for a British armored brigade to move south from Nijmegen, advance on Veghel from Uden simultaneously with the advance of the 506th elements, and clear the road for resumption of traffic. That done, the armored brigade was to strike sharply to the south and cut off the route of escape for the enemy, at Erp. (27)

The first part of the plan worked extremely well, for the 506th Battalion, after advancing about 2000 yards against indifferent resistance, made contact with the Grenadier Guards.

However, the armored units did not carry out their part of the plan briskly enough, and the opportunity to destroy these German forces which had been harassing the Division for the past several days, was lost as darkness intervened and contact was broken. (28)

During the day, the last glider serial had arrived in the Zon area, bringing another field artillery battalion and remnants of the 327th Glider Infantry.

The seaborne echelon of the Division also arrived on the 22nd and 23rd of September. This consisted chiefly of motor vehicles and three batteries of 50 cal. anti-aircraft guns from the AA/AT Battalion. The consolidation of the Division was now completed, and permitted normal attachments and combat team organization after six days of improvisation and expedients.

On the 24th, after a detailed reconnaissance of the area, it was determined that the countryside around Veghel was clear of enemy. Apparently he had made good his withdrawal to the southeast.

The disposition of the Division was as follows:

- a) The 506th Infantry, with the 321st F.A. and 'B' Battery of the Anti-Tank Battalion was dispatched to Uden to assume the defense of that area.
- b) The 502nd Infantry was responsible for the St. Oedenrode area, with the 377th F.A. Battalion in direct support, and Battery 'C' of the Anti-Tank Battalion attached.
- c) The Division Command Post was at Veghel, and the Division service area remained back in the landing area at Zon.

At about 1000 hours the enemy plans for the day were divulged by a series of probing attacks directed against the 501st positions, as his forces moved from Schijndel to Koevering, seeking the gap between the 501st and the 502nd to the south.

Two companies of the 502nd moved out of St. Oedenrode north to Koevering, in order to intercept this force which was estimated to be about forty infantrymen supported by two tanks. When the two companies arrived in Koevering, the enemy force was almost there. Unable to prevent the force from cutting the road northwest of the town, just before dark these two companies set up a defense of Koevering. During the night, enemy forces, later identified as elements of the 1st and 6th Parachute Regiments and the Hermann Goering Regiment, built up their strength in this gap between the 501st and 502nd. Tanks, self-propelled artillery and infantry widened the salient which was covered with fire from the 907th and 377th F.A. Battalions. By morning, however, the enemy force was astride the road in strength, and communication north of Koevering was severed. (29)

During the night, the 506th Combat Team was ordered to return to Veghel from the Uden area in order to attack to the south and clear the road.

At about 0915, the 506th, with a squadron of the 44th Royal Tank Regiment in support, moved into attack against the salient, with the 3rd Battalion to the left of the road and the 1st Battalion to the right. The 2nd Battalion was in reserve.

After progressing quite rapidly for about 2000 yards, the attack lost its momentum in the face of punishing artillery fire and fire from dug-in tanks. A continuation of the attack to the front was impossible, so the 2nd Battalion was ordered to make

(29) Personal Knowledge

a wide envelopment to the east of the road, supported by the Royal Tank Squadron.

The British 50th Division, supported by strong armored forces, was also moving up from the south in a sweep to the right of the road.

These two forces made contact at about 2000 hours, and succeeded in containing the enemy salient, reducing it to just a small area south of the road, when the attack halted for the night.

The 506th continued the attack at first light in the morning of the 26th, and had cleared the road of enemy by 0900, making contact with the 501st Infantry on the right.

The British forces continued to attack to the north, and as they advanced, the 506th Infantry was eventually pinched out of the thrust.

That afternoon the 506th returned to the Uden area, while the remainder of the Division maintained its position along the highway. (30)

The road which had been cut for 36 hours, bearing no traffic at all on the 25th of September, was once more open to the troops, armor and supplies moving to the north.

This marked the last attempt on the part of the enemy to choke off this vital communications route, and the Division was thereafter able to settle down to a more routine type of warfare until it was moved north to the Arnhem area. (31)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

The aspects of this operation which warrant consideration are concerned chiefly with the results derived from Operation Market - Garden itself, since the Division's actions were so intimately a part of this larger plan.

Field Marshal Montgomery, in his book, "Normandy to the Baltic", has declared that the Operation Market - Garden was 90% successful. Even though it failed to achieve the desired results, it left the Allies in possession of crossings over four major water obstacles.

However, it seems to this writer, that these objectives lost their importance when the vital crossing over the Neder Rhine was not secured.

The surprise and shock action gained by the use of Airborne troops was not exploited aggressively enough. An operation of this kind should not be attempted without the assurance that the full weight of the conventional forces would be exerted in developing and consolidating the initial triumphs of the Airborne units.

It is admitted that this operation did provide the Allies with some advantages in that it enabled the Scheldt estuary to be cleared more rapidly than it otherwise would have been. It also liberated a large part of Holland which was to play such an important part in the attack across the Rhine the following March.

Examining the actions of the 101st Airborne Division, it is apparent that only the tremendous flexibility of an Airborne division enabled it to perform as brilliantly as it did. Since this characteristic flexibility is derived from the nature of its initial employment, the requirements of the situation pre-

presented no insurmountable obstacles. Battalions moved about within the Division area just as a Company Commander would employ his platoons. At times the defense had an air of expediency about it, as reserves were rushed to contain a threat and a new reserve was constituted from other sources not immediately threatened. When three battalions are on line and each is from a different regiment, as they were in the defense of Veghel on 22 September, I believe the matter of flexibility of command and flexibility of plan are readily demonstrated.

Another factor affecting the speed with which the Division secured its objective, was the proximity of the drop zones to the objectives. It is very desirable to have the drop zone as close as it is physically possible, so that units do not have to fight their way over long stretches of terrain in order to secure these objectives.

In seizing the bridge at Zon, it is possible that a plan providing for a drop on both sides of the bridge may have been more effective, since it would have prevented the defending force from presenting a strong front in any one direction.

The lack of artillery support seriously hampered the Division during the first few days. It is very probable that if artillery had been available on D-Day, the resistance at Best would not have required the employment of so much strength which could have been utilized elsewhere and more profitably. Artillery support for the 506th, in its advance on Eindhoven, would also have enabled it to accomplish that mission more rapidly.

The same reasoning applies to anti-tank guns. Their need was aptly dramatized on 19 September when they were rushed to the Zon bridge immediately after landing on L.Z.-W, and very

effectively broke up a tank threat against that bridgehead.

The lack of both artillery and anti-tank weapons in the initial lift was due to the fact that only a certain number of aircraft were assigned to the Division, and it was a command decision to omit these units in favor of increased numbers of parachute personnel.

Another factor which contributed to the success of the Division was the decision to make this a daylight drop. This was instrumental in achieving compact and accurate drop patterns on the whole. The Division was also able to enter the operation with the minimum of preparation, whereas a full dress rehearsal would probably have been required if it had been a night drop such as the one in Normandy. Daylight drops simplify the problems confronting the Air Force in marshalling, and the Airborne in assembly. However, it is apparent that we must possess air superiority in order to carry out this type of drop without harassment.

From the enemy standpoint, it would appear that a determined anti-airborne defense would have had excellent chances for success in the early stages of the operation. This was especially true since the schedule of the ground troops designated to make contact with the Airborne, was so badly disrupted in the first two days. It is quite probable that this operation would have been a dismal failure if it had been dealt with with more daring and boldness on the part of the enemy. He committed his forces in piecemeal fashion and in most cases in limited attacks, so that the Division was able to confront his efforts with superior counter-efforts.

LESSONS

Some of the lessons which were derived from a study of this operation are:

1. Anti-tank and artillery weapons should be in the initial lift of an Airborne operation, and aircraft should be made available for this purpose.
2. Daylight drops enable an Airborne Division to operate more efficiently, on landing. They are especially effective when the enemy is on the run and we possess air superiority.
3. Flexibility of command and flexibility of plan are necessary elements if an Airborne operation is to succeed.
4. Drop Zones of Airborne units must be as close to intended objectives as it is possible to get without dispersing the units over too much terrain.
5. Airborne units should not be used unless they can be supported adequately by Air and Ground forces.
6. When Airborne troops are used, the whole nature of the operation is an aggressive one; therefore this aggressive quality should be developed by any ground forces which are operating with the Airborne troops, and an all-out offensive which will definitely accomplish the mission, must be maintained.
7. Anti-airborne defense should provide for a rapid commitment of the strongest possible force in a determined counterattack designed to annihilate and destroy the attacking force before it is able to assemble and consolidate its gains.



